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ABSTRACT

In the current climate of accountability, the responsibilities of principals have increased. The new role of principals requires new forms of training, and standards-based reform is generating major changes in principal-preparation programs. This digest examines some of those changes. First, it looks at the effectiveness of principal-preparation programs. There is a general perception that most programs are ineffective, but there is not enough research to support or abrogate such perceptions. Next, the digest explains how the knowledge base of principal preparation is changing. Academic theory and field experience, while both important, are being redefined to fit the new standards. Next, the digest discusses how leadership programs can improve the quality of principal candidates. Mentoring, aspiring principal academies, and formal nomination by principals and superintendents are some of the strategies being used. The digest next discusses the need for continuing inservice education for principals and advanced certification that will lead to the development of principals and elevate the status of the profession. Finally, the digest discusses ways that states and districts can support leadership development. States hold considerable influence through licensure and accreditation requirements, and districts can apply leverage through collaboration with university programs. (Contains 13 references.) (WFA)

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Transforming Principal Preparation

By Larry Lashway

As standards-based school reform nears its twentieth anniversary, policymakers continue to assert the need for strong principal leadership, and with good reason. Virtually every state, as well as the federal government, puts accountability for results directly at the school level. New principals who took over a school this year faced a dramatically different environment than principals just five years ago.

Facing new roles and heightened expectations, principals require new forms of training, and university preparation programs are coming under increased scrutiny. In particular, the demand that principals have a positive impact on student achievement challenges traditional assumptions, practices, and structures in leadership preparation programs.

Dissatisfied practitioners, policymakers, and professors have a long history of taking potshots at programs they see as unimaginative, overly theoretical, and impervious to reform. However, the recent activity goes beyond the usual carping and tinkering with course content. The unrelenting pressure of standards-based reform is stirring major changes in recruitment, curriculum, and licensure. This *Digest* examines some of those changes.

How Effective Are Principal Preparation Programs?

By reputation, principal-preparation programs are not highly effective. A recent Public Agenda survey found that 69 percent of principals and 80 percent of superintendents believed that typical leadership programs "are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school district" (Farkas and colleagues 2001). Over 85 percent of both groups believed that overhauling preparation programs would help improve leadership.

Some professors have joined in the criticism. Joseph Murphy (2001) has characterized traditional approaches as "bankrupt." Michelle Young, head of the University Council for Educational Administration, has conceded that change at the university level has been slow, and that faculty are not always well-connected with the field and are sometimes complacent about adopting standards (Norton 2002).

Does research back these claims of inadequacy? Unfortunately, the evidence is scant. Louis Wildman (2001), after a review of the literature, reached "the inescapable conclusion...that there isn't much research." He found a scattering of studies evaluating different dimensions of leadership programs, but nothing that would permit any conclusions about their overall effectiveness. Some studies have documented positive student perceptions about redesigned programs, but research thus far has found no correlation between leadership programs and principal effectiveness (measured by teacher perceptions) or indices of effective schools (McCarthy 2002). At this point, most of the debate over principal preparation programs is based on relatively small-scale case studies and surveys, supplemented by professional judgment about best practices.

How Is the Knowledge Base of Principal Preparation Being Redefined?

Joseph Murphy has argued that putting academic knowledge at the center of programs is inevitably self-defeating. No matter how effectively professors package and present the knowledge, they (or their students) ultimately face the problem of creating a bridge between theory and practice. Too often, he argues, it turns out to be a "bridge to nowhere."

John Daresh (2002) notes that both academic knowledge and practical experience have limitations as well as benefits. Academic knowledge can acquaint candidates with the conceptual foundations of a very complex field and can provide a common language to talk about the problems of practice but is at best a partial sampling of what principals need to know. Field-based knowledge has obvious practical value but is oriented around existing practices rather than reforms that may be needed. In addition, Daresh advocates a role for "personal formation," which is the leader's integration of personal and professional knowledge that provides a moral compass for navigating the complex landscape of practice.

Murphy has recommended recasting preparation around the purposes of leadership. He suggests that leaders can be viewed as moral stewards, as educators, and as community builders. Each of these metaphors could serve as the framework for broad syntheses of ideas and beliefs that would have relevance for both academic knowledge and practice. Similar themes, which have gained wide acceptance among professors and policymakers, are embedded in the standards developed by the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium.

Standards alone, however, are probably not enough to reshape leadership programs. John Norton has noted that standards-based redesign is too often "a paper-and-pencil game that requires players to match course titles and content with the adopted higher standards." To be most effective, the new standards should lead to a fundamental rethinking of content, delivery, and assessment.

How Can Leadership Programs Improve the Quality of Principal Candidates?

Entrance into most preparation programs has been determined by self-selection, with half-hearted screening and little outreach to talented individuals. In the words of SREB official Gene Bottoms, the process is "based on the Graduate Record Exam, undergraduate GPA and a check that doesn't bounce" (Norton).

Theodore Creighton and Gary Jones (2001) reviewed 450 principal-certification programs and found that their admission criteria gave the most weight to GRE scores and undergraduate GPA. They also cited data from Educational Testing Service showing that education majors had lower GRE scores than majors in most other fields, and that educational administration candidates ranked near the bottom of education majors (outpacing only physical education majors).

An even greater concern was the relative scarcity of requirements linked to the kind of personal qualities (such as vision) desired in today's principals. Creighton and Jones noted that only 6 percent of programs required personal interviews in which such qualities might be identified, and only one university in the sample used

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assessment center activities as part of the process. Surprisingly, considering the emerging focus on instructional leadership, only 40 percent listed teaching experience as a requirement.

Current best-practice recommendations emphasize the need to connect admission practices with leadership standards (Browne-Ferrigno and Shoho 2002). Possible approaches include the use of focused interview protocols, 360-degree evaluations, performance portfolios, writing samples, and assessment-center activities (Norton; Creighton and Jones). In addition, programs should work collaboratively with practitioners to identify and "tap" strong candidates. Mentoring, aspiring principal academies, and formal nomination by principals and superintendents are some of the strategies being used.

How Is Preparation Being Extended Beyond the Initial License?

Like teacher training, leadership preparation has traditionally been front-loaded, with an intensive period of formal preparation and certification followed by informal, self-guided, and sporadic professional development. Increasingly, however, practitioners and policymakers are recognizing the need to provide a seamless continuum of professional training throughout the leader's career.

After years of neglect, professional developers are zeroing in on the critical induction period in which the principal's career choice is either validated or undermined. The old sink-or-swim initiation has been replaced by structured experiences in which mentoring plays a major role (Malone 2001).

While many of these efforts have been initiated by local districts, a growing number of states are supporting induction and professional development by mandating "second-level" certification that requires formal mentoring, reflection, portfolio development, and/or on-the-job demonstration of skills. Unlike traditional second-level certification, the new programs ask leaders to do far more than take a specified number of university courses. For example, Louisiana's second-level certificate requires participation in a structured mentoring program, a portfolio, and a professional growth plan (Southern Regional Education Board 2002).

Also on the horizon is advanced certification beyond the requirements of licensure. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2001) has proposed establishment of the American Board of Leadership in Education (ABLE), which would conduct a rigorous assessment designed to identify "highly accomplished" practitioners. As with the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, participation would be wholly voluntary and not formally linked to state licensure. The NPBEA has argued that existing leadership standards are designed for beginning administrators and that ABLE would provide benchmarks for exemplary performance by experienced leaders. The process would set targets to guide the development of principals and would simultaneously elevate the status of the profession.

How Can State and District Action Transform the Preparation of Principals?

In the new reform environment, independent action by universities is not the only pathway to transforming leadership preparation. States hold considerable influence through licensure and accreditation requirements, and districts can apply leverage through collaboration with university programs.

The Southern Regional Education Board (2002), which has undertaken a major effort to support the improvement of leadership preparation in sixteen states, has identified key state actions that can reshape leadership preparation. The steps include infusion of performance-based standards into preparation programs, integration of well-planned clinical experiences with coursework, and tiered certification systems in which the second-level certificate requires evidence of successful on-the-job performance.

School districts can support leadership development in a variety of ways. Districts can work with university programs to identify promising candidates, host meaningful internship experiences, and provide advice on program content and delivery. In addition, practitioners can serve as mentors and adjunct instructors. Some large districts have negotiated tailor-made practice-based certification programs with universities (Keller 2000).

However, collaborative efforts are far from easy. In the words of university professor Patrick Forsyth, personnel at universities and K-12 schools are "quite different in how they operate and how they think" (Norton). Successful partnerships require motivated participants with the authority to get things done, and the ability to clearly articulate their needs and expectations.

Thus far these collaborative efforts have generated mostly anecdotal accounts. As with traditional programs, there is little evidence that connects preparation practices to principals' on-the-job performance or to student achievement. It may be that the crucial missing link in reform efforts is research that would begin to make those connections (Tricia Browne-Ferrigno and colleagues 2002; Norton).

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